

Interview

with

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Jennie Betts

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Notes on transcript

When began involvement in CRM:

All through college.

Got involved through SCDC and NAACP. Same people. Overlapping leadership and membership.

Involvement in campaign?

I worked in it. I did door-to-door canvassing, passed out his literature for him. We met everyday at the headquarters. Daily meetings there. Then, we would come in at night and look over. We had maps (that were part of town we hadn't covered?). We walked. It was a very close election.

What else do you remember?

Well, I remember Mr. Sugarmon ran for one office and Rev. Roy Love ran for Board of Education. I know those two ran. Later on, AW Willis ran for legislature and he won.

Were there a lot of women involved with electoral involved?

Women were very involved in the campaign process, but now women are running for office. But at that time we were more or less pushing our men. As a result, Mr. Sugarmon pushed those of us who wanted to run for office. He pushed us.

He pushed women to run?

Yeah. Russell was a good person. He pushed a lot of ladies.

Did some end up running for office?

Yes. Some won. Maxine was on the board some twenty years and Minerva Johnican served on the county commission.

Any other differences in terms of men and women's roles?

There were lots of differences because we were completely segregated. That was the beginning of breaking down segregation.

What was the beginning?

When Mr. Sugarmon ran. That's the first time black folk ever running against white person. Later on, I think in the fall, that was when the sit-in movement broke out. It was quite int. I was real young then and excited. It was a bunch of students - more or less college students. We had some adults in sit-in movement like Lorene Thomas and C. J. Washington and Ms. Wheeler, Ida Burchfield, Elizabeth Russell. Some of these people are dead. Not many of us left. I was what you call young, real young then.

Were you involved with sitting in?

Yes. Johnnie Rodgers Turner also.

Were you one of the first group of students that sat in?

Yes.

Could you talk about that?

I was excited, hot tempered. Russell Sugarmon moved me off sit-in and made me a reporter. I remember that well. What reporters did – when they picked them up, I would call and tell them. I was an observer b/c I was too hot tempered. They tell us to be nonviolent. I want to fight when it got tough.

Marion Barry also involved – what was his role with it. Did he inspire you to sit in?

Marion Barry didn't inspire me to sit in. I inspired myself. To me, he was just a student. I do remember him. To me, he was just student. He was a leader in his own rights. H. T. Locakard, Ben Hooks, Sugarmon, and Willis were our lawyers. We did what they instructed us to do. But, I didn't do what they told me to do so they had to moved me outside.

Was there an incident?

A white gentleman put his cigarette on his coat. I didn't hit back but I told him if he did I would hit him. They knew I meant it so they moved me. They did so with other students. Nobody hit anyone. We wouldn't have been successful if had hit back. Wouldn't have helped movement.

I understand for like 18 months.

Yes.

Black Mondays.

That's what led into blacks being on the school board. When that happened, I was married and had a child. I stayed home with my child during that time. He was in school system by time busing came.

What was your view of busing?

At that time, I felt it was only thing we could do b/c courts had said to desegregate schools but they wouldn't do it. No other choice but to order busing. Would never had it if cts had done what they were told. But, now, neighborhood schools are gone. I was bused all the time to school. I was bused all the time, so not an issue for me.

Do you see decline of neighborhood schools as something that isn't good?

Yes and no. I have mixed feelings. Open house law in 1964. In this neighborhood. White flight. I watched as whites left my neighborhood, now it's somewhat integrated.

People of all economic levels participating in sit-ins?

Yes, it was poor and middle class and Catholics were very involved in the movement. White Catholics. It was both.

Any leadership role in Dem. club?

I was an assistant precinct leader in 14-2.

What were your responsibilities?

Go from door to door and let voters know there was an election, pass out literature, and ask some of them to place yard sign in yard. Now, voters aren't as educated as back then. We educated them. Now, nobody talking it up. Election in a month, was at NAACP meeting, not the same sort of involvement. That wasn't back in 1959. In 1950, 60, 70, and 80s. You don't hear it in later years. We had coke parties. One of my jobs was to see to it to get coke parties in neighborhoods. When you have them, you're supposed to have some people get in the home so the candidates can come and talk to them. I even had coke parties in my home. I haven't had one in my home since 1970s. No one has asked me.

So, you've observed a real decline in political activity.

Yes, they're not interested anymore.

Why?

I don't think they understand. Children don't know anything about them. I hate it but that's the way it is. We are going backward.

How widespread was the community in elections in the 1950s and 1960s?

The whole black community was interested. When we start moving out to where we want to move, that's when I saw the int. declining. When we were in one segment of the city, people were very int. But they don't seem to be int. now.

So, movement away has broken up the unity.

Yeah, the unity.

So, one of the things you could attribute the unity to is living close to each other.

Right.

What else could you attribute unity to in elections?

Everybody knew each other. There was good communication. At that time, everybody knew Sugarmon, Hooks, and right now if you ask our young adults who is Russell Sugarmon? My son know him through me but they don't know him. Jesse Turner. We have declined.

Who were some of other main leaders of movements back then.

Jesse Turner, Fred Davis, Melvin Robertson (deceased), Ida Burchfield, George Holloway. Burchfield is living but Holloway is deceased. Holloway was a labor leader and he was with the labor movement and he could more or less We listened to him, he was a leader.

He was black?

Yes. Melvin Robinson was an insurance agent manager for NC Mutual Insurance. Burchfield more or less stayed in the office but she was heavy in the Binghampton area. She had lots of pull out there. We talk about now how that has declined.

Were these people all involved with NAACP and Democratic club?
All of them were involved with both.

What were you hoping to achieve through political activity?
I was hoping to make Memphis better. In a sense it made it better and some sense it made it worse.

What do you mean?
I'm disgusted b/c the youngsters are not involved or interested as I was. They won't go vote. We haven't gotten them involved in voting.

You think in that sense things have gotten better. You were trying to make Memphis better and how end up working?
We were able to motivate them to come out and vote for our first black mayor. He had been superintendent of schools. (She's talking about how young people voted here). But now we're getting people from out of city?

How were you hoping to make Memphis better?
I was hoping to make it better by black and white working together. Going to school together, living in the same neighborhood. That was what I was hoping for. Some parts of the world are like that. In Wisc. - my husband went to school there - never black teacher till came to Memphis. His teachers were white. I was wondering how come we in the S couldn't be integrated like the N.

You were hoping with electoral activity to break segregation barrier down?
Yes. In some senses it has b/c we are in an orgtn. I'm in retired teachers association. They have two - a black one and a white one. I chose to join the black and white one instead of the black. They asked me to join the black one. I said no b/c I would be defeating my purpose all these years.

So that's how it exists now - black and a white and a black and white one?
Yeah. I retired in May, last month, and joined the black and white association.

You mentioned one of your jobs was to educate people about elections, candidates. How did you do that?
I would go to the house. They would ask me to come. They would get a group of people together like at a coke party. I would go and talk to them about the candidate and I would bring the candidate with me and let him talk too rather than just listen to what I had to say. That worked well. I was able to get workers out of that group to come help us.

Not only educated but also recruited people?

Yes. "How can I do what I'm doing?" I told them and they did it. Politics is lots of fun. People say it's nasty. It's what you make it. It's not nasty. You can be a true politician. I shake my head if something's not right. I don't take money under the table. If I'm working for you, I'm working for you. I don't take money.

Did people in white community and even white candidates – from what I've heard – try to buy votes from you or put pressure on you? Did you run into that?

Yes. It would be like that if they know you are a leader. They try to buy votes from you. Get you to do this for them. But you have to say no. Don't sell your integrity for nothing.

What sort of response did you get from these white people when you said no. They left me alone, didn't bother me anymore, they went on to something else?

Did you experience any threats or harassment with your work?

I got a few of them, because when I lived not in this home. In 70s they burned a cross in our yard and filled mailbox full of sugar. But that didn't scare me.

Resentment in black community to Sugarmon and other leaders b/c middle class background.

That is correct. Resentment b/c of their middle class background. It was our job to educate them, to let them know they're just trying to bring them up to where they were. Some of us were able to do that – yes, they have a middle class background but they're trying to bring you up to middle class. We'd tell them to come to work with us. They were just preaching what we were preaching. But they had lots of resentment back then. Mr. Sugarmon did have a middle class background as did Willis but that's the way it was. I use the word resentment but I call it jealousy. That's what it was.

It's something despite that unified votes and voting for right candidates.

If you get some ward and precinct leaders, they can do it. They can unify their precinct. There was a time we could tell if there was a good ward or precinct by looking at the turnout. The same thing goes on now like in 48 – a good ward and precinct – high votes. It's a black neighborhood. They still have their civic club that meets every month. Any precinct that meets you're going to see the results at the election.

How often did your precinct club meet?

We met every second Tues. in the mo.

Did you go to board meetings?

Yes. We went on first Monday night.

What were they like?

We were looking at next candidate, mayor, governors. Whatever's coming up. We were looking at () election.

What sorts of questions ask candidates before club and how decide to endorse.

We would let them talk first and then pick them apart with the questions. We let everyone come in – Republican, Democrat, etc. – to be interviewed. After they were gone, we made our decision of who to vote for. Sometime the decision was hard. But that person had talked to somebody in our meeting, so that was hard.

It speaks of the influence of the club if they were taking those means.
Yes.

Getting men to follow her – did you experience that it was more difficult to convince men – didn't follow your advice b/c you were a woman.

Yes, that was exactly right. More or less, who was doing it – we had a few men – there was more women than men here in precinct clubs. Yeah, they would get made with us. They had difficulty following a woman. But we kept on.

How did you deal with that?

I let them alone We called them chauvinists.

Did they eventually follow you?

They eventually. One time one man was so resentful. I gave man some literature about voting, ballot, and all this. He said, "you didn't give me no ballot." I said, "I didn't intend to give you one. Because you're so resentful, I thought you knew everything." He said, no, I want the ballot. I said I thought you had your own ballot. So, he started acting different toward me.

So sometimes you had to be real tough like that and stand up to them.

Yes. That's what I had to do. Mens are something else. Some are, not all.

What about the role of churches in your political work. How did that figure in?

Church respect me very highly. Even today, the church is looking for me to bring them a ballot on how to vote. If I don't bring it, they're disappointed. If it had not been for the church – the church played a major role in the CRM and voting and all that stuff.

Would the ministers announce who the congregation should vote for in the service?

Some of them did that. We asked them not to do that. We told them that wasn't good for them as a leader. Just let them know who is running and don't single out any one of them. So we pretty much got them to do that.

Just announcing that there was an election?

Yes, and a phrase like "you know what to do." Rather than telling folks to vote for--.
Because some of our ministers were taking money and we knew that.

From white people?

Anybody against them.

Anybody who were trying to influence them to endorse certain candidates?

Right.

Why did you have it that you didn't want the ministers to endorse certain candidates?
Well, that could hurt their status with the 504.

With tax code?

Yea. You can be political but not partisan.

When they announced the election, people knew to contact people like you?
Yes.

This was a hint that they should get involved with their precinct clubs and so forth?
Yes. Encourage them to come to the meetings so they can be educated b/c churches are exempt. Keep doing that you won't be.

What about the role of business in campaigns. You mentioned one of the leaders was involved with the NC Insurance Co. Did businesspeople play a () role?
All he did was use the folks that were working for him. The company did not.

I talked to Fred Davis and he said that he would organized his insurance holders.
Yes, he served city council. JO Patterson Jr. served too. Fred Davis was a good councilman.

I know he's well respected.
Yes.

Were you involved with voter registration efforts?
Yes. I'm involved now - got to go this week. I'm still involved in that. I've been involved every year. Now, we have our young people Youth Council involved at NAACP.

I saw Youth Council back in 60s as well.
Yeah, that was good.

Were you involved at all with CNPC.
Yes.

Was that the vehicle used to do voter registration?
Yes.

Consisted of people of the Democratic and Republican clubs and NAACP?
Yes.

It existed yearround but particularly people got involved with it with campaigns?
Yes.

RS said that CNPC was an adhoc committee?

Yes.

Was that committee just solely during campaigns?

Yes, leading up to election.

But there were other people involved year round in voter registration efforts?

Yes.

SIDE B

We have political action committee. That's not ad hoc. We always registered people.

How find time to do all this work – you were in school and so forth. How much time put into this activity?

After school. When you're young, you can do a lot of things. After I was married and at home with kid, pretty much free to do what I want to do.

With Dem. club board meetings, there were issues that Sugarmon would raise and precinct leaders would put on the table.

Yes.

What were issues? I know screening and endorsing candidates took place. What were some of other things on the agenda?

Well, one of the issues was busing. That was a hot issue, because most people didn't () busing. It was an issue but we never took a vote on it. Our thing: don't need to vote b/c Judge is going to decide. That was one of the hottest issue b/c different opinions.

With the 59 election, what do you remember about white resistance?

Well, I didn't see any resistance. They were scared because they really felt Sugarmon was going to win. He almost won too.

Why were they so scared?

They just didn't want blacks holding elections. ().

Why?

They wanted to keep things like they were. On bus, had to sit at back. (). That was an issue too.

A lot of whites at time said race relations were peaceful and harmonious. Why did they say that?

I think they knew better but they were trying to get us to see it was peaceful. We didn't think it was peaceful. Everything was labeled black and white. Water fountains, bathrooms.

Were you involved with 1960 election with Kennedy campaign?

Very much so. I had a good time with it. Young, energetic. I went from door to door campaigning and that Kennedy election was sort of easy b/c I had a slogan I could use

and folks would believe me. Goldwater said he was going to take Social Security away from you. Folks didn't want those checks cut off.

Goldwater ran against Johnson?

Yeah.

Kennedy ran against Nixon in 1960?

That's what it was Goldwater ran against Johnson. Didn't have much trouble with Johnson or Kennedy. Nixon turned folks off, I don't know what it was.

Invited to the inauguration?

She was. I was invited to Clinton's too.

How did you feel about Kennedy's?

I felt good. Only thing it takes a lot of money to go. Every step of the way I was with Kennedy. Clinton is too much for me.

One of precinct leaders ended up going – Druzy Anderson.

Yes, they saw to her going. My husband paid for me to go to Kennedy's inauguration.

How many precinct leaders ended up going?

I don't know. We had a bus. Mr. Sugarmon went. Smart man.

Some jealousy of leadership would you say overall people respected or thought highly of the leadership.

Yes. There was some of it. Overall, they respected him. She talked about how one person in her church commented that Sugarmon was smart and honest.

What think of newspaper coverage of that time and civil rights movement?

Newspapers didn't do a good job of writing of what actually happened.

How so?

Like right now. I pay little attention to what newspapers say, esp. about controversial issues.

What about black newspapers. TSD and Memphis World?

They were pretty much right. It may be late coming out but it would be actually what really happened. Coming out once a week.

Were editorials and so forth influential in community?

Well, they did the best they could do. I much preferred reading them at that time than PS and CA.

What else did you find not right about white newspapers – example?

If black did something good, they always put it near the death notices section. If black did something bad, they put it on the front page.

I noticed looking at the PS coverage of 1959 election that it was so biased and they were pushing for the white candidates.

They were really pushing.

That editorial would so often end – democratic election.

We weren't liked too well.

What would you say were intersections among political and protest activities?

There was some. Blacks had to wake up? Sugarmon and Willis just coming back from law school with aim to get us together. We had a Republican Party here and the leader was Lt. Lee. At that time, Memphis was voting half and half until Mr. Sugarmon and Democratic club. They've been going Democratic ever since.

How influential Lee and Lincoln League as compared to SCDC?

Once SCDC was there and got organized, he declined and LL declined in influence.

SCDC became powerhouse?

Yes and it drew more young folk. He had old people?

There was a generational gap as well.

Right, right.

Generational gap in sit-in movement between young people like you and leaders like the Smiths and Russell Sugarmon and so forth? Did students feel that adult leaders of NAACP had to push more or be more militant in their actions?

No. It was organized well. We used college students – no high school students – and the reason being because I think they felt we were or should have been more mature. I felt things would've gotten out of hand with high school students.

Why did you decide to sit in the library?

Well, I was in college and you just couldn't find anything in the black library that we needed. We didn't have computers like we have now. There wasn't nothing in black library. The one that I sit in – everything that I wanted. But I was arrested from the library. It was just wrong.

What happened after you got arrested?

Jail. Five times one day.

They would get you out of jail and you would go back and sit in again?

Yes.

That must be a record – 5 times in one day.

Yeah, five times.

Were you involved with any of the picketing?

Yes.

I know there was an 18-mo movement on Main Street. We picketed newspaper, everything downtown. We had shifts yeah. The older folks helped too. We more or less took afternoon because we were in school. Adults were in morning. People would come to pay the bill – we told them to mail it – don't cross. I know a lady came out and wanted to pay a bill and she came out with a bag. One of the students grabbed the bag. Another came out and put her bag down in clothes. We didn't say anything but we saw it.

These were black people?

Yes.

Cameras too.

Yes.

Network where NAACP and SCDC were members. Informed of 18-mo going on so same structure. Precinct clubs used to organize direct action.

Right.

Would you say 1959 election gave the black community momentum in wanting to engage in political and protest activity and woke them up?

I think it did.

The sit-ins right after that seemed to be something even more. More publicized. It really started with 1959 and then the sit-ins.

Right.

Freedom Rally – what it was like?

It was nice but kind of dangerous. I had fear for King's life. His last speech was something. March 28th – we couldn't march because of snow.

So, you were involved with marching of Sanitation strike? Yes. I was marching during that and one where riots broke out. [She describes the scene – march and violence.]

What was impact of King's death on black community and your political activity?

Something about 15 cent increase.

Sugarmon said it was like a heart attack for black community.

It was.

SCDC – didn't engage in as much political activity after that.

That's when we started going down.

Seemed like before too schisms with Dem. club and other problems and people wanting to have power for themselves.

That's true – people wanted to have power for their own personal reasons.

That served to break up the unity of the club?
Right.

Where did funding come from for campaigns, SCDC, and so forth.
We would raise a lot ourselves through precinct clubs. Sold dinners, had banquet.

Go to Freedom Banquet when Daisy Bates spoke?
It was nice. Civil rights banquets always make you reminisce back.

Campaign of Evers and Stanback. What did people think of their campaign?
We just felt they were in it for what they could get out of it, didn't feel like it was real. I don't know that to be true. He never won anything.

So they didn't take those campaigns as seriously?
No, they didn't those seriously at all.

It seems to with them and it seems exaggerated what they were saying.
Yeah, there was a lot of exaggerations in there.

Giving hundred of speeches. Numbers inflated. Rhetoric of people in the paper – struggle that all the world is going to know about. Did people believe that or was that lofty rhetoric?

I think they were mixed on that one. I don't know.

I saw a lot of candidates made television appearances during time. Do you remember?
I remember it, but we didn't have the money to get on television.

How many people involved with your precinct club?
30 or 40.

And then there were block clubs?
Block clubs and precinct clubs are the same.

How involved were children and youth in terms of 1959 campaign. People younger than you at the time?
We had a few children involved. Sort of scared to put children out there because felt it was an adult situation.

When you engaged in the sit-in movement, did your family experience any repercussions of that?
My parents didn't lose their job b/c they were living in Hennings and they owned what they lived in. I did have a friend – her parents lost hers b/c her parents lived on plantation. My parents weren't pleased with me participating but I did.

What did your parents do? My father had his own farm. He raised soybeans and cotton?

How connected was Memphis movement by national civil rights effort? Locally driven or inspired by King.

We more or less did our thing locally. A lot of people wanted to give credit to King for movement in Memphis. He did not start the movement, we started it.

Was SNCC involved at all in Memphis?

Not so much. Later on.

When begin involvement?

I remember them but involvement really came out of LeMoyne and Owen College. More so that than SNCC.

What about SCLC?

To me, they weren't that involved in Memphis. I felt that King was the organization. It wasn't an organization, just a group of preachers. I saw Henry Bunton was involved with it.

So, it was students, NAACP, and Democratic club here.

Yeah, that's right.

Did you keep black and white politicians accountable that you helped elect?

Very much so.

How so?

When they did something that we were going to do, and then they didn't do that, we told them that.

Did you threaten that you wouldn't vote for them the next election?

We didn't threaten them. We just said we'd see you at the polls.

All in all, we got some good candidates through the Democratic club. Al Gore Sr – he did a lot for the community.

Who were some of the other politicians who thought did a lot of good work for the black community that you had endorsed through SCDC?

Gore, Bob Clement, Ned McWherter (that was the last one we endorsed).

What about local politicians that made a difference?

Bill Farris, JO Patterson, Fred Davis, Russell Sugarmon, AW Willis, H. T. Lockard, Vasco Smith, Maxine Smith, Jesse Turner Sr.

Some people say desegregation in Memphis was peaceful and voluntary. What would you say about that assessment?

It pretty much was so. I just felt we could've integrated the schools without the court order. We had to be forced to do it. In some places, they didn't have to be forced to do it.

Were students who sat in engaged in previous political and civil rights activity. The Democratic Club that's all they had been involved.

How many would you say were involved with Democratic Club or 1959 election?
Practically all of them.

Did any say how 59 election was inspiring to them.
I hadn't talked to any of them about it.

What do you think should be done now about continuing problems among whites and blacks?

I think they need to come together a little more. Some of us are together, some of us aren't. For me, I have no problems. But, some people never have lived in black and white community or so. Maybe they would help.

Diversity.

Yeah. I don't have any problem with black and white. I wish we could come a little more closer. I see it breaking down?

What do on membership committee of NAACP?

I go out and solicit memberships. My work shows up at the Convention.

How go about getting membership?

Ask people. I ask white and black. People just want to be asked. They feel important when you ask them when they join.

Anything else that we haven't talked about or I've missed or you'd like to add?

Memphis was largest NAACP branch in United States and largest branch of young people in United States. That's the results of hard work out in the street. Can't do it at home.

Grassroots work?

Right, grassroots worker. I enjoy writing memberships.

Mrs. Wheeler – she did receive some white support. Did you run across support of whites?

Yes, you would be surprised. Whites will support black candidates.

Even in 1959 campaign?

I wouldn't be surprised. Like Anne Shafer. They knew what they were doing.

Part of your work instructing people how to operate voting machines?

Yes, I did that at church convention. Often people say 14-2. 14 is the ward and 2 is the precinct. Right here is 79-1. Ward 79, 1.

How many precincts in a ward?

One.

Single shotting – what did that refer to?

A precinct is nothing but your surrounding neighbors. We have “Night Out” in this community.